

ARCHAEOLOGY

Cretan "Church" Older Than Christianity

With the Cross as a Symbol Cretans Worshipped 1200 Years Before Christ in Edifice Much Like Modern Church

By EMILY C. DAVIS

THEY HAD CHURCHES in ancient Crete. Churches like Christian places of worship, with altars and choir stalls and chancel screens.

In fact, a modern Sunday morning church-goer might feel surprisingly at home if, by some Einstein trick of time and space, he found himself alive 3,500 years ago and standing in a temple to the Mother-Goddess of Crete.

This first evidence that churches are older than Christianity has been discovered by Sir Arthur Evans, noted British archaeologist who has given thirty years of his career to digging up the marvelous civilization of the island of Crete in the Mediterranean Sea.

It was Sir Arthur who revealed that Crete had a brilliant civilization many centuries before the Golden Age dawned in Greece. Sir Arthur and his workers brought to light the Palace of King Minos of Crete, as artistic and as comfortable a royal residence as any ruler could desire.

Sir Arthur, patiently clearing away the earth from palace walls, found paintings showing that ladies on the Isle of Crete, 1,600 years and more before Christ, wore flounced skirts, wasp waists, and décolleté gowns. The British archaeologist uncovered wall paintings showing that Crete was the land of dangerous bull-grappling contests long before Spain took to bull-ring sports.

The Greatness That Was Crete

At every turn of the spade has come new evidence that men and women of Crete were sophisticated, intelligent, and with it all deeply religious. Their king was a priest who served the great Mother Goddess of Crete. The king's lovely palace was a combined residence and temple. Even the sports in the bull-ring where agile youths and maidens leaped over the heads of bulls, were religious festivals in honor of the great Goddess. Throughout the ruins that Sir Arthur has uncovered, he finds everywhere in the wall paintings and art objects the symbols that reminded devout Cretans of their religion.

But it is something new to find that the pagan religion of this island evolved independently the style of architecture that we think of as typically Christian.

The discovery of the Cretan church was made, as so many archaeological discoveries are, through accident. A gold ring was the start of the adventure, and a small boy who lives on the island of Crete was the starter. The boy was working in his father's vineyard, not far from the ruins of King Minos' Palace at Knossos, when he spied a shiny object. He picked the object out of the dirt and held in his hand a heavy gold finger ring. The ring was a massive seal engraved with two scenes representing the Goddess of Crete journeying in a boat to a sanctuary, and receiving refreshment at the end of the journey. Rings as handsome as this have been used throughout history as royal ornaments and tokens.

The valuable ring has since mysteriously vanished.

Royal Ring Was Clue

But to Sir Arthur Evans, who, of course, heard about the discovery, the appearance of a royal ring in a vineyard was much more than a dramatic incident that ended mysteriously. Archaeologists are among the keenest detectives of science. Sir Arthur studied the scene of the discovery and set about connecting ring and vineyard with long-ago events and places.

It was probable, he reasoned, that robbers laden with plunder from some nearby house or tomb dropped the ring in flight. The vineyard, he observed, lay in a hollow of a hillside. On either side of the hollow, sharp limestone bluffs jutted out. In just such locations the people of ancient Crete had often set their buildings. Their great palace at the capital city of Knossos was set on top of a hill, and some of the rooms were fitted into contours of the hillside, like basement rooms. Hillside offered good sites for tombs, too, in the Cretan estimation. And the resting place of the priest-kings of Crete had never been found.

So, when the archaeologist had completed his work of restoring the Palace

of Minos, he brought workmen to the vineyard where the ring was discovered, and they began to trench into the edges of the limestone bluffs.

Hopes of finding new ruins were rewarded. After weeks of patient digging, the workmen excavated buildings that had stood on and in the hill. And Sir Arthur realized that another of his expectations had come true. For he had believed that the royal tomb of the kings of Crete would be a temple-tomb, befitting rulers who were also priests.

Above ground, on the hillside, a small temple had stood. Beneath the temple, like a basement, the tomb was cut into the rock of the hill slope. And on this lower, "basement" level were other rooms. There was a pavilion where memorial feasts could be held. There was a courtyard where funeral sports could take place, and a roof-terrace above, from which spectators could look down upon the athletes.

Painted Sky for the Dead

The burial chamber itself was planned with care. Glistening white gypsum was effectively used on the walls and as material for a central pillar. Overhead were heavy cross-beams of cypress wood, originally decorated with colors. And between the roof beams, the rocky ceiling was painted a brilliant Egyptian blue to convey to the dead a vision of the sky.

When Sir Arthur came into this tomb of the priest-kings, all the burials except one had been removed. The island of Crete was shaken more than once by sharp earthquakes in ancient times, and robbers were not slow to seize such chances to loot the unguarded treasures of royalty.

The one burial which remained for the archaeologists to examine was in a state of disorder. This was, Sir Arthur believes, the grave of one of the last sons of the House of Minos. Robbers had carried off precious metal objects, leaving only such things as a globular flask, an incense-vessel brightly painted, an alabaster bowl.

In the entrance passage of the tomb, Sir Arthur found the skull and some bones which belong almost certainly to this grave. This late prince of the dynasty was an elderly man of athletic training, judging by what anthropologists can read in the skeletal remains.

A little way beyond the tomb of the

priest-kings, the expedition struck the stones of another building, the residence of the priest who had been guardian of the tomb. And in this residence is the architectural feature which is as surprising as any discovery made in buried Crete.

The priest-warden had built in his home a private chapel so like our modern churches that it is difficult to believe it could have been planned two thousand years before Christ, and for the worship of a pagan goddess.

Pagan temples have commonly had altars, as churches do. But in any pagan temple the differences from church architecture are far more striking than the likenesses. That is, archaeologists would have said so until the Cretan priest's chapel came to light.

How strangely the people of Crete anticipated church arrangements may be seen by comparing the Cretan chapel point for point with a modern church. Take, for example, the beautiful Bethlehem Chapel in the National Cathedral at Washington.

Same Plan as Modern Chapel

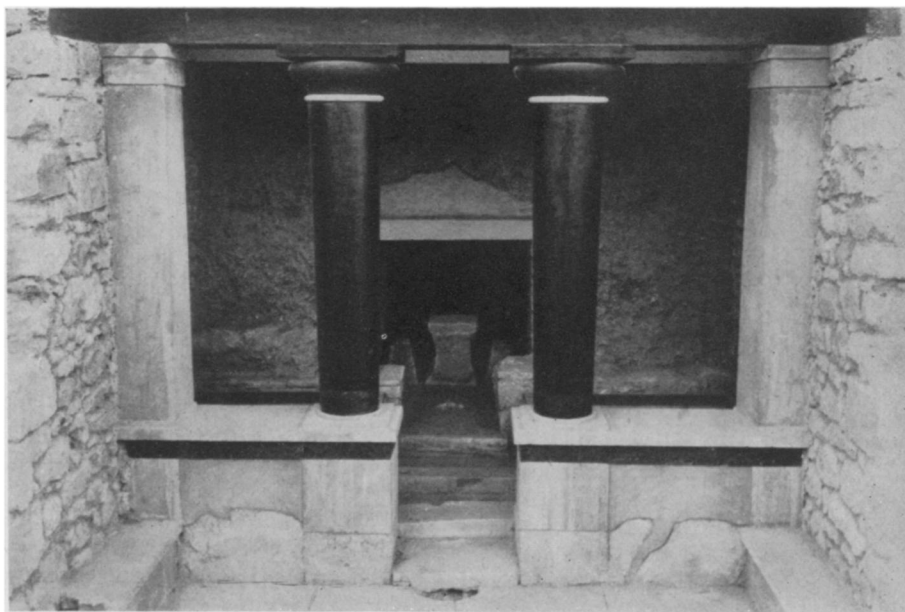
The Bethlehem Chapel, in fourteenth century Gothic style, is more elaborate than the simple chapel of the Cretan priest. But the plan is very similar. Both chapels have a chancel where the rites are conducted, screened off from the nave where observers may sit or stand. In both chancels, the altar is at the center, flanked by two columns. Steps lead up to the altar in both chapels.

The choir stalls, where those taking part in the service may sit, are inside the chancel in the Bethlehem chapel. In the Cretan chapel the choir stalls were benches just outside the chancel.

There was a chancel screen fitted between columns and wall in the Cretan chapel to accentuate the division between the inner shrine and the outer place of worship. Such chancel screens are common in modern churches. Bethlehem Chapel happens not to have one. If it had one, the screen would be placed where the rails stand, at the chancel front.

The little chapel in the priest's residence is today a bare, swept room. But when the priest lived there to guard the tomb and to conduct the games and feasts at the temple, the chapel was undoubtedly furnished richly. Some of these furnishings would add to the "churchly" look of the place.

Crosses, for example, were among the religious symbols of Crete. What the cross suggested to the minds of people



TO THE MOTHER GODDESS OF CRETE

A modern Christian might easily feel at home in this 3,100-year-old temple.

in ancient Crete is not certainly known. Archaeologists think that probably the four arms of the square cross suggested the four directions, north, south, east and west. The man or woman of Crete looking at the square cross thought, perhaps, of the power of their Goddess and how it spread to all the earth.

Sir Arthur Evans once collected a group of articles he found in shrines on the island of Crete, and arranged them as he thought a priest of the Goddess might have prepared an altar. In the center of the altar he placed a polished cross of white and gray marble, about nine inches in diameter. On one side, he set the image of the great Goddess herself, with high headdress and arms outstretched to hold the serpents that symbolized her control of the underworld. On the other side, he placed a figure of a priestess also holding serpents.

Dragonflies for Immortality

In front of the square cross, he set a stone bowl which would hold the water used as a symbol of purification. Tall lamps he ranged on either side, and rows of sea shells were placed as a border. Shrines of Crete were often adorned with these shells which the people brought from the beaches. Dragon-fly figures were among the smaller objects which the Cretans used to inspire religious thoughts. So Sir Arthur placed on the altar several dragon-fly images, symbols of immortality.

The marble cross, of all the old emblems of the Cretan religion, has at-

tracted the curiosity and attention of modern inhabitants of Crete. Sir Arthur wrote, following his finding of the Cross, that no votary of Minos' times could have regarded this cross with greater veneration than did the orthodox Greek pope whose parish included the remains of King Minos' Palace-Sanctuary. The marble cross, Sir Arthur added, did much to confirm the views of the flock that the fresco figures found in Cretan ruins were icons of saints of old.

Yet the civilization of Crete was wiped out in a catastrophe—probably an earthquake — 1,200 years before Christ. And there is no apparent connection between the crosses and churches of pagan Crete and the crosses and churches of Christianity.

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Eating apple peelings is good nutrition economy, for the peel contains six times as much Vitamin C as the pulp near the core.

A glacier in the crater of the extinct Armenian volcano, Mt. Alages, 15,000 feet above sea level, has been discovered by a Soviet geographical expedition.

Because there is no standard definition for "pickle," a national packers association is writing its own scientific definition, hoping it will become standard.